
Called To Be a Communion of Churches: A Discussion Starter

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At its 2005 Executive Committee meeting, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches adopted a vision statement meant to guide and integrate its different programmes and activities. The vision statement reads: “We are the World Alliance of Reformed Churches consisting of Reformed, Congregational, Presbyterian, Waldensian, United and Uniting churches. We are called to be a communion of churches joined together in Christ, to promote the renewal and the unity of the church, and to participate in God’s transformation of the world”¹. The purpose of the following notes is to help the WARC leadership to reach a common understanding of the new vision and to begin a reflection on its implications for our common life as a fellowship of churches.

I. The vision: from an alliance of churches to a communion of churches

1.A vision statement made by an organisation such as WARC can be understood as the criterion for and the sustaining power of its life and programmatic work. A vision statement has at least two fundamental dimensions. The first, often implicit, is a reference to the

¹ “The Vision, Core Callings, Priorities and Structure”, WARC Executive Committee 2005, document 10.1; “Narrative Record”, Action 9, p. 4.

present: a vision “cannot be described in a vacuum”², it is “an extrapolation from the present”. It says something critical about what we are today as WARC. The second, explicit, is a reference to the future: a vision has something utopian, it involves “dreaming dreams”, it takes “the perspective of the eschaton”, it must “provide hope even when there seems to be little ground for hope”, it describes concisely what WARC intends to be tomorrow.

2. These two dimensions – a critical reference to the present and a hopeful or utopian reference to the future – can be found in the short vision statement adopted by the WARC Executive Committee in its 2005 meeting. Who are we today? “We are the World Alliance of Reformed Churches”. Whom are we called to be tomorrow? “We are called to be a communion of churches”. The key word about the present, about who we are today, is “Alliance”. The key word about the future, about whom we are called to be tomorrow is “communion”. The heart of the vision statement, the movement leading from our present reality to what we dream for tomorrow can, therefore, be described in four words: “from alliance to communion”. If this movement leading from an alliance to a communion of churches is to be fully owned by WARC member churches one day, it must be theologically clarified and exhaustively debated right now. These notes are one of the possible entry points to a discussion hopefully involving the networks concerned, officers, and the members of the Executive Committee.

II. “Alliance” means federation

3. The word “Alliance” in WARC’s name is not just a deference to an ancient “Reformed” way of approaching the relations between God and humanity in terms of “covenant”, historically known as “federal theology”. The word “Alliance” in WARC’s name describes the type

² All quotations from paragraph 1 are from Marlin VanElderen, “Towards a Common Understanding and Vision”, *The Ecumenical Review*, 42(1), January 1991, pp. 138-145.

and quality of the relationship established among the churches that founded WARC in 1875 or joined it later. This type and quality is that of a federation of churches, as the word “Bund” in WARC’s name in German (*Reformierter Weltbund*) clearly indicates. Our World Alliance is a World “Federation” of Reformed churches. Other international or national church organisations are also alliances or federations: The Baptist World Alliance, the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches. Other words, such as “council” or “conference” are also used to describe the same “federal” reality when they appear in the name of church bodies such as the Reformed Ecumenical Council, the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council, the World Council of Churches, the Christian Conference of Asia, the South Africa Council of Churches.

4. What is typical about federalism understood as a model of church fellowship³? This model, with roots in 19th century North American Protestantism, is, first of all, a model that focuses on common action, particularly in mission, evangelism, service and justice. The Presbyterian Alliance was created in 1875 to consider questions of general interest to the Presbyterian community, to seek the welfare of Presbyterian churches, to commend the Presbyterian system, and to “entertain all subjects directly connected with the work of Evangelisation...”⁴ Secondly, this model of church fellowship affirms the continuing independence of the churches⁵. When a church becomes a WARC member church it expresses its willingness to somehow cooperate with other member churches without giving up its doctrinal, liturgical, ministerial, or financial autonomy. According to the present WARC constitution, the powers of the General Council, which is a kind of world general assembly or synod of member churches, shall not “limit the autonomy of any member

³ For what follows cf. H. Meyer, *That All May Be One*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1999, pp. 81-88.

⁴ Cf. the first Constitution of the Alliance in William G. Blaikie, “Introductory Narrative”. *Report of Proceedings of the First General Presbyterian Council Convened at Edinburgh, July 1877*– With Relative Documents Bearing on the Affairs of the Council, and the State of the Presbyterian Churches Throughout the World. Edinburgh, Thomas and Archibald Constable, 1877, p. 9.

⁵ H. Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

church”⁶. This means that the Alliance has no jurisdiction over its member churches. They are not constitutionally committed to agree with (and even less to implement) any of its decisions. This also means that from the fact that they are members of the Alliance it does not follow that they have jurisdiction or authority over each other. WARC is a free association of churches.

5.While it is true that our present model of fellowship is perhaps the most widely known and used, it is also true that, from the perspective of the ecumenical imperative – of making increasingly visible the unity given in Christ to all who are baptised in his death and resurrection – this model has its own limitations. John Kent once wrote that “Christ is more than the president of a federal republic of Christian associations”⁷. He described our model as denominations “glued together at the edges”. Federalism’s ecclesiological weaknesses, writes the Methodist theologian Geoffrey Wainwright, “reside in its falling short of a genuinely conciliar capacity for decision making on matters of doctrine and discipline, and in the shallowness of its vision of what is possible and required in a life of koinonia in the gospel”.

What is important about these critical remarks is not the fact that the Alliance should seek to become a sort of Reformed World Church – which seems definitely excluded. Important is the fact that the limits of our federalism are calling us today and perhaps in the years leading to our next general council, to reflect as we have never done before on the urgent need to strengthen the common life of Reformed churches and perhaps reinvent the institutional instrument of a renewed common life.

6.It is clear that when WARC member churches state in their admission process that their position in faith is in general agreement with “the historic Reformed confessions”⁸, they also admit, first of all, that though institutionally separated, they are not divided by major

⁶ “Constitution and By-laws”, article IV.2.6. *Accra 2004 – Proceedings of the 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches*, Geneva, WARC, 2005, p. 293.

⁷ All quotations in this paragraph are from G. Wainwright, “Federalism”, *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva, WCC, 2002, p. 469.

⁸ Constitution, Article II, 1.4 in *Accra 2004*, Geneva, WARC, 2005, p. 291.

faith or doctrinal issues, and, secondly, that by not being divided in the fundamental understanding of the gospel, they remain institutionally separated but not divided when they gather around the Word made gesture, the Lord's Supper. However, it is also clear that this incipient pulpit and Lord's table fellowship⁹ has hardly become more intentionally explicit in the common life of the Alliance member churches during the past 131 years. What has prevailed in practice is a strict free-association type of understanding of membership in WARC whereby membership in a federation of churches remains external to the autonomy and organised life of the individual member churches. Is the federal model the most adequate instrument for the full manifestation of our implicit "ecclesial density"? How can this implicit ecclesial fellowship be internally and institutionally unveiled, unpacked, fully owned and implemented by each member church?

III. *Koinonia*: Communion

7. This leads us to the key word about our future, about whom we are called to be tomorrow: *koinonia*, communion. In a stimulating article on the use of the term "communion" in current ecumenical dialogue and theology, the Reformed theologian Joseph Small has summarised the results of a survey on the New Testament use of this term¹⁰. Communion, he writes, expresses "the deep communion of believers with the triune God", which reveals "the very being of the one God – Father Son and Holy Spirit" (2 Cor 13.13; 1 Cor 1.4-9; 1 Cor 10.16, 17). Communion is therefore "a theological reality before it is an ecclesiological possibility. The communion of believers with God "takes shape in a communion among believers that bears the marks of communion with Father Son and Holy Spirit" (1 John 1.1-3, 1 Cor 10.16, 17). Communion within the community "is more than a

⁹ According to the Confession of Augsburg, 7, what is necessary for the church as church is enough for its unity.

¹⁰ Cf. for what follows Joseph D. Small, "What is Communion and When is it full?", *Ecclesiology*, 2.1 (2005), pp. 71-87.

vague expression of togetherness, for it entails shared fidelity to the truth and to truthful living” (2 Cor 13.13; Philemon 4-7). Communion expresses “reconciled agreement between diverse forms of fidelity to the gospel and differing forms of communal life, as well as reconciliation of sinners” (Gal 2.9). Communion among various local communities “is characterized by mutual responsibility that finds expression in sharing resources” (Acts 2.42-45; Rom 15.25-27).

8.As from the 1980s, the biblical notion of *koinonia*-communion just sketched has moved to the centre of several bilateral ecumenical dialogues engaged in the search for a common understanding of the church. In the multilateral ecumenical forum represented by the World Council of Churches (WCC), the term has gained prominence as a new way of describing the unity we seek in the ecumenical movement. According to the WCC Harare Assembly, “the unity of the church to which we are called is a *koinonia* given and expressed in the common confession of the apostolic faith; a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship; a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognized and reconciled; and a common mission witnessing to the gospel of God’s grace to all people and serving the whole of creation. The goal of the search for full communion is realized when all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness.”¹¹ It is worth noting that the WCC, like WARC, is an international fellowship of churches. As they seek to grow in fellowship, these churches have restated their ecumenical vision, what they intend to be tomorrow, in terms of *koinonia* or communion.

9.During its almost 60-year history, the Lutheran World Federation (unlike WARC!) has continuously raised significant ecclesiological questions about its self-understanding both as a fellowship of churches and as the

¹¹ M. Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope (eds), *The Ecumenical Movement – An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, Geneva-Grand Rapids, WCC-Eerdmans, 1997, p. 124.

organisational instrument of that fellowship¹². First of all in connection with the (never materialised) membership of the Synod of Missouri churches (1950s), later on in connection with church and society issues such as social transformation and liberation (1960s), then in response to the major challenge to Christian fellowship represented by apartheid (1970s), these ecclesiological discussions about the LWF self-understanding prepared the ground for the process which (during the 1980s) culminated in the official recognition that almost all LWF member churches were formally in “pulpit and altar fellowship” with each other and that, for this reason, the LWF now understood itself as a communion of churches (Curitiba, 1990).

10. The LWF member churches share first of all a “doctrinal basis”: the LWF “confesses the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the only source and norm of its doctrine, life and service. It sees in the three Ecumenical Creeds and in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, especially in the unaltered Augsburg Confession and the Small Catechism of Martin Luther, a pure exposition of the Word of God”. The LWF constitutes “a communion of churches which confess the triune God, agree in the proclamation of the Word of God and are united in pulpit and altar fellowship”. It confesses “the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, and is resolved to serve Christian unity throughout the world”. As an instrument of its autonomous churches the LWF “may take action in matters committed to it by the member churches. It may act on behalf of one or more churches in such specific tasks as they commit to it. It may request individual member churches to assume tasks on behalf of the entire communion”¹³.

11. It is to the biblical teaching about *koinonia* and particularly to the quality of inter-church relationships which the term describes in current ecumenical language

¹² Cf. for what follows M. Root, “Affirming the Communion: Ecclesiological Reflection in the LWF”, in J. H. Schjorring et alii (eds), *From Federation to Communion – The History of the Lutheran World Federation*, Minneapolis (USA), Fortress Press, 1997, pp. 216-246.

¹³ *Constitution of the Lutheran World Federation*, articles II, III and IV, http://www.lutheranworld.org/Who_We_Are/LWF-Constitution.pdf.

that the WARC vision document adopted in Evian points. What is important at this point is not to raise the question as to whether WARC member churches are in a position to or will ever pursue the path of formalising “pulpit and altar fellowship” with each other; what is important right now is not to move to the debate on how Reformed ecclesiologies might relate to the above description of *koinonia* as a model of church unity. More important, it seems, is first of all to recognise that the Evian vision statement translates the willingness to move to a higher quality of inter-church relations that at a further stage might give rise to a renewed, more challenging and effective organisational instrument of that relationship. This recognition immediately calls for a theological study on issues such as the spiritual, biblical and theological significance and responsibilities attached to membership in the Alliance; or the spiritual, biblical and theological significance of mutual commitment, mutual accountability and mutual vulnerability among churches in today’s world. What is at stake, for instance, is a new quality of mutual belonging whereby each member of the WARC family and the WARC family as a whole will respond as a body to local and global challenges to the survival of the earth community.

12. We can now ask ourselves whether WARC has ever experienced this just mentioned “higher quality of inter-church relations” throughout its history; whether WARC has ever exhibited the evidence of a self-understanding that includes a degree of ecclesial density that transcends what one usually expects from a federation of churches. It is possible to answer this question positively. On at least one occasion in its history the Alliance, though constitutionally organised as a federation of churches, acted as a matter of fact (supra-constitutionally?) as a communion of churches. This was in 1982, when the Alliance’s General Council, gathered in Ottawa, Canada, declared “with Black Reformed Christians” that apartheid “is a sin, and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the Gospel, and in its persistent disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy”. The Alliance also took action by suspending two of its member churches “from the privileges of membership in

WARC”¹⁴. What are some of the lessons of this declaration of *status confessionis* on apartheid for our reflections on the new statement of the WARC vision?

13. In the face of apartheid, WARC member churches recognised that their own autonomy as churches cannot remain unaffected by their life together in the Alliance when it is widely admitted that the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord (and therefore the theological reality that the fellowship bears) is being jeopardised by differing views or practices. In the face of apartheid, Reformed churches in a fellowship of faith engaged in mutual oversight and discipline. They truly acted as churches through the WARC instrumentality. WARC’s Ottawa General Council did not act as a “Rat”, a “conseil”, a “consejo”, but jurisdictionally as a Konzil, a “concile”, a “concilio”. It acted with authoritative synodal status. WARC temporarily ceased to act as an external federation. It experienced the need to act as a constitutive element of the ordering of its member churches. When the delegates of the suspended churches (and later on other delegates) raised a point of procedure by asking the WARC President to rule on the constitutionality of the suspension of the two white churches, the President ruled that the decision on suspension was not *ultra vires*, beyond power, and put his ruling to a vote. “There was overwhelming support for the ruling”¹⁵, which shows that the delegates found it not only necessary, but also appropriate, legitimate to act churchly as WARC.

IV. Towards a discussion on communion

14. The WARC vision stated at Evian in 2005 concerns the World Alliance understood first and foremost as a fellowship of churches. Only in a derived way does the

¹⁴ “Resolution on Racism and South Africa”, *Ottawa 1982 – Proceedings of the 21st General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational)*, Geneva, Offices of the Alliance, 1983, p. 179.

¹⁵ *Ottawa 1982*, op. cit., p. 33.

vision concern the World Alliance understood as the institutional expression of that fellowship. It is true that it is not always possible to distinguish between the church fellowship as such and its institutional expression, but it is also true that this distinction helps us focus on the discussion on church fellowship and more precisely on the meaning, privileges and responsibilities conferred by membership. Seen in the light of the current ecumenical language, the vision stated at Evian in terms of “communion” raises first of all the question about deepening our common life as a fellowship of churches (preferably through actions taken by our churches at their highest synodal level).

15. It is also important to keep in mind that the vision stated at Evian does not say that we are called to be this or that communion of churches by following this or that model adopted by this or that Christian world communion or ecumenical organisation. It just says that we are called to be a communion of churches; it just states that we are called to deepen the fellowship beyond its federation status. Like the previous paragraph, this one also helps us focus on the fellowship of churches rather than on its institutional instrument. Only by extensively focusing on WARC as a fellowship of churches will we be able to give a satisfactory answer to the question of the communion we seek.

16. This leads us to turn our attention to the WARC fellowship of churches as it exists today. This is the concrete starting point of the vision discussion. Two aspects of the present Alliance need to be taken into account as we move to a discussion about deepening our fellowship. The first one is WARC’s remarkable ecclesiological diversity. The first words of our vision point precisely to this fact: “We are the World Alliance of Reformed Churches consisting of Reformed, Congregational, Presbyterian, Waldensian, United and Uniting Churches”. The word “Reformed” in our name is not enough to explain what we are today. Five other church names are required to make it more accurate. We are no longer the “Presbyterian” Alliance we used to be until 1970, nor are we any more the International “Congregational” Council we used to be until 1970 – two

Christian world communions with clear confessional profiles. We have never been just the World “Reformed” Alliance nor are we likely to become just the World Alliance of “United” Churches.

17. However, this healthy ecclesial diversity, something we are very attached to as Protestants, becomes a major challenge when what is at stake is the search for church communion at the international level. This challenge is manifold. First, this ecclesiological diversity makes the search for communion, for new forms of common life at the international level more complex. Some of our churches are attached to Congregationalist polity, others to continental Reformed or to Scottish-American Presbyterianism. Still others, unlike most churches in our traditions, are episcopally ordered, and in at least two cases their bishops are in the historic episcopate or the apostolic succession. How to deepen such a diverse fellowship by the common adoption of new bonds of communion? The second aspect of our challenge has to do with what the Scottish theologian Peter McEnhill has recently referred to, in an essay that features WARC, as our “vulnerable catholicity”¹⁶, a vulnerability that prevents Reformed churches, as the Reformed Martin Cressey has noted elsewhere, from properly expressing their conciliarity at the international level¹⁷ as they do at other levels. Thirdly, we are seeking greater fellowship at the international level whereas our member churches, the Presbyterians included, struggle with so to speak strong internal “congregationalist” (lower case) trends.

18. The second aspect that needs to be considered is WARC’s longstanding ecumenicity. Our vision statement says that “we are called to be a communion of churches” for the sake of “the renewal and the unity of the church”. As a matter of fact, this second aspect, our ecumenicity, partly explains our remarkable ecclesiological diversity. We were Presbyterians and Reformed officially opened to

¹⁶ P. McEnhill, “The Reformed Tradition and the Ecumenical Task: ‘A Vulnerable Catholicity’”, L. Morris & N. Sagovsky, *The Unity We Have and the Unity We Seek – Ecumenical Prospects for the Third Millennium*, London, T & T Clark, 2003, pp. 77-90.

¹⁷ M. Cressey, “On Being a Conciliar Church – The Ecclesiology of Presbyterian Order”, *The Ecumenical Review*, 51(4), October 1999, pp. 355-363.

the rest of the Protestant world in 1875¹⁸; we officially encouraged the membership of united and uniting churches when the ecumenical movement gained momentum in the 1950s; and we merged with the International Congregational Council in 1970 also encouraged by the conviction (highly arguable today) that the ecumenical age was the eclipse of the confessional age. None of the current constitutional purposes of WARC, adopted in the 1970 uniting General Council, includes anything exclusively Presbyterian or Reformed, if such a thing does exist. They are, on the contrary, couched in the language of what has been called an “Evangelical Catholic Theology”¹⁹. Since our ecumenicity is constitutive of our self-understanding as WARC, we should not reflect on what the call to be called a communion of churches means for us today separately from the ecumenical situation to which the expression “reconfiguration of the ecumenical movement” points.

19. One of the many implications of these two aspects of what we are as we engage the WARC vision discussion is that a distinction needs to be drawn between Reformed self-understanding and WARC self-understanding. The World Alliance is often called a “Christian World Communion”, which suggests that it expresses a clear confessional and ecclesiological self-understanding. As a matter of fact, it can be better described as a family of church families which relate differently to a common ecclesial and confessional memory shaped largely by the Swiss reformation. Still more precisely perhaps, WARC can be described as a federation of churches in the wider Reformed family which envisage their future within the ecumenical movement. Whichever views we hold on the consequences of this ecumenicity for WARC’s identity today, any attempt to deepen fellowship among WARC member churches by sharpening WARC’s Presbyterian or Reformed profile needs to pay serious attention both to our ecclesiological diversity and to our inherent ecumenicity.

¹⁸ For a detailed account see O.P. Mateus, “Towards an Alliance of Protestant Churches? The Confessional and the Ecumenical in the WARC Constitutions (I)”, *Reformed World*, 55(1), March 2005, pp. 55-80.

¹⁹ I am referring to the title of Alan Sell’s book about WARC, *A Reformed Evangelical Catholic Theology – The Contribution of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches*, Eugene (USA), Wipf & Stock, 1998, 304 pp.

V. Communion and Compassion

20. Towards the end of the 1970s, when the unity we seek through the ecumenical movement was often described and discussed as a “conciliar fellowship”, the Presbyterian theologian Lewis S. Mudge embarked on what he called “some journeys of the imagination” and proposed, as a result, “an ecumenical vision for the year 2000”²⁰. A changing world and growing ecumenical indifference lead Mudge to ask: “to what vision of ecumenical opportunity does this historical moment call us?” He goes on to answer: “the theological challenge is clear. It is to link, unmistakably, two things: (1) the effort to recover unity in a reinvigorated faith and (2) Christian engagement in the struggle of peoples the world over for the realization of their hopes for full self-expression and full participation in the human family”. The search for unity has thus become a dialogue “not only of ecclesiologies but of cultures”. If this is so, then we do not necessarily advance towards conciliar fellowship worldwide “by trying to create (...) more inclusive denominations at the national level”. More homology needs to exist between our ecumenical vision of a dialogue of ecclesiologies and cultures and our conciliar idea.

21. Lew Mudge goes on to propose the idea of the creation, first of all in each place, of councils of episcopé or oversight within which “faith, ministry, sacraments and authority are mutually recognised, in which justice is diligently sought, but in which great diversity of expression and organisation continues to obtain”. The thrust of such local councils of episcopé would be “in the local deployment of ministry for the pastoral work and mission of the church”. They would be strategy councils “for the deployment of ministry and mission” and give “first priority to thinking about, and leading the church in, mission”. In the essence of this proposal, notes Lew Mudge, lies “a direct link between the conciliar

²⁰ Cf. for what follows Lewis S. Mudge, “An Ecumenical Vision for the Year 2000”, *Christian Century*, September 19, 1979, p. 882; also www.religion-online.org.

expression of church unity and the ministry of justice, compassion and concern in the midst of the world”. Lew Mudge’s proposal is deeply marked by its time and (its North American) ecumenical situation. However, it remains a helpful example of a (Reformed...) way of thinking about growing in fellowship beyond federalism that is intentional about holding increasingly together, in WARC language, general agreement with the historic Reformed confessions and covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth, unity and mission, mission in unity.

22.Finally, Lew Mudge’s proposal leads us into the final words of our vision statement. We are called to be a communion of churches not only for the sake of the renewal and unity of the Church of Jesus Christ, but also in order “to participate in God’s transformation of the world”. Here is WARC once again refusing to look like an end in itself and resisting today’s strong conservative ecumenical trend that consists in making progress on ecclesiastic unity at the expense of that unity that grows out of our common witness to the Kingdom of God preached first of all to the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner.

23.By calling its member churches in 1997 to a process of recognition, education, and confession on matters of economic injustice and environmental destruction, WARC was in fact challenging them to convert and grow together not for their own sake, but for the sake of bearing witness to the gospel of justification and justice in today’s world. But can’t we listen to the word of God and bear witness to it without having to be accountable to churches from the same family that ultimately live in a world completely different from ours? Can’t we do it without engaging our increasingly limited resources in programmes and gatherings that often take place outside our own borders, under the leadership of people we hardly know, and which often do not speak directly to us? We often assume that we can. As a matter of fact, centuries of denominationalism, following the ambivalent institutionalisation of the Reformation movement in the wake of the religious wars in Europe, have led us to think that our individual denominations,

our national or regional “churches”, are fully equipped, fully entitled or fully capable of exercising separately, in isolation, all functions that belong to the whole Church of Christ²¹. The 1997 Debrecen call to a process of confession and the Accra Confession adopted in 2004 teach us that we stand a better chance of faithfully listening to the word of God and witnessing to God’s coming kingdom in today’s world by growing together in mutual vulnerability.

²¹ In his article quoted above, Joe Small reminds us that Charles Clayton Morrison once defined denomination as “a part of the Church of Christ existing in a structure of its own and exercising by itself those functions which belong to the unity of the whole church of Christ”. Joseph D. Small, “What is Communion and When is it full?”, *Ecclesiology*, 2.1 (2005), p. 84.